

Why do “young” women get breast cancer?

When it comes to breast cancer, “young” usually means anyone younger than 40 years old. Breast cancer is less common among women in this age group. In the United States, about 5 percent of all breast cancer cases occurs in women under age 40.¹

Women who are diagnosed at a younger age are more likely to have a mutated BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene. These genes are important in the development of breast cancer. Women who carry defects on either of these genes are at greater risk of developing breast and ovarian cancer. If a woman carries a defective BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene, she may have a 30 to 85 percent chance of developing breast cancer in her lifetime. In addition, having a mother, father, daughter or sister who has or had breast cancer also increases a young woman’s risk of developing breast cancer. So while the risk of breast cancer is generally much lower for young women, there is still a high risk for some.

If you are concerned about your genetic risk, ask your doctor to refer you to a genetic counselor who will discuss in detail what your risk may be. You can talk with your health care provider about genetic testing, screening tests, like MRI, or risk reduction options that might be right for you.

Diagnosing breast cancer in young women can be more difficult because their breast tissue is often denser than the breast tissue of older women. By the time a lump can be felt in a young woman, it is often large enough and advanced enough to lower her chances of survival. In addition, the cancer may be more aggressive and less responsive to hormone therapies. Delayed diagnosis in young women is a problem. Because it is rare for a young woman to get the disease, they are often told to wait and watch a lump. Tell your doctor if you notice a change in your breasts, and think about getting a second opinion if you are not satisfied with his or her advice.



If you have had breast cancer, you still may be able to have children.

A helpful tip for young women

Clinical breast exams are recommended for all women beginning at the age of 20, at least every three years, or every year if you are age 40 or over. If you are under age 40 with a family history or other risk factors you should talk with your health care provider about risk assessment, when to start getting mammograms or other imaging tests and how often to have them.

It is important to know how your breasts normally look and feel. See your health care provider right away if you notice any of these breast changes:

- Lump, hard knot or thickening
- Swelling, warmth, redness or darkening
- Change in the size or shape of the breast
- Dimpling or puckering of the skin
- Itchy, scaly sore or rash on the nipple
- Pulling in of your nipple or other parts of the breast
- Nipple discharge that starts suddenly
- New pain in one spot that doesn’t go away

¹ American Cancer Society, Breast Cancer Facts & Figures 2009-2010.

Hearing the pitter-patter of little feet?

Some treatments for breast cancer can affect a woman's ability to have children. If you think you would like to become a parent after breast cancer, talk with your doctor about your options before deciding on treatment.

In the past, doctors would advise women who have had breast cancer not to have children. Doctors thought that the added estrogen and progesterone during pregnancy may promote the growth of breast cancer. Yet, there are no studies that have clearly shown a link between pregnancy and recurrence of breast cancer. Today, many doctors say it is fine for women who are free of cancer and not undergoing treatment to become pregnant. Some suggest waiting 2 to 5 years after diagnosis — the most likely period of recurrence — to assure that breast cancer has not returned.

Some women around age 40 who are closer to menopause find that after chemotherapy, their periods do not return. For those who are in their 20s and 30s and who still have their periods after chemotherapy, the ability to have children may be unaffected. If you are hoping to have children after cancer treatment, talk with your doctor about your options.

For mothers with breast cancer

If you are a mother of young children and you have breast cancer, it can be hard to tell your children what you are going through. Remember that children can pick up on their parents' feelings, and may be confused if you do not talk to them about your condition. Telling your children in simple terms about your cancer and sharing some of your feelings will help them understand the changes around them. Every mother is different, and your parenting style may be different from someone else's. But in your own way, try to share with your children what you are going through. Also, trying to maintain your usual routine may help your children adjust to the changes. Talking about your breast cancer can help both you and your children cope with the disease.

Resources

Young women with breast cancer may have special concerns that are different from those of older women. Finding the right support group can bring strength and friendship through sharing your thoughts and feelings. Many larger hospitals have or can refer you to cancer support groups in your area. Or you can contact these organizations for more information:

Susan G. Komen for the Cure®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) —
www.komen.org
www.ShopKomen.com for these booklets:
What's happening to me?
What's happening to the woman I love?
What's happening to mom?
What's happening to the woman we love?
The Hope Tree: Kids Talk About Breast Cancer

American Cancer Society
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

Breast Cancer™ Network of Strength
1-800-221-2141 (English) or
1-800-986-9505 (Spanish)
www.networkofstrength.org

Fertile Hope
1-888-994-HOPE
www.fertilehope.org

Young Survival Coalition
1-646-257-3000
www.youngsurvival.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Genetics & Breast Cancer
- Talking With Your Children
- When You Discover A Lump or Change